

Gorbochev, Mikhail

Drawer 26

Comparison with Others

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# Abraham Lincoln Comparisons

Mikhail Gorbachev

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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# The Lincoln-Gorbachev Debate at Moscow State U.

By David Remnick  
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, March 23—At a seminar table today at Moscow State University, a group of students studying the American secession crisis that faced Abraham Lincoln put aside their history books and considered Lithuania's challenge to the shape and future of the Soviet empire.

"It's dangerous to make comparisons, but in some ways Mikhail Gorbachev and Abraham Lincoln are in the same position," said Lubomir Zeherev, a student from Moldavia. "They were desperately trying to keep their unions together. What we are hoping is that there will be no civil war here."

Eric Foner, a Columbia University historian who leads the seminar, said: "There really is a genuine parallel between Lincoln and Gorbachev. Lincoln's position, like Gorbachev's, was that a union, no matter how it was formed, cannot be abandoned. The question is: Who decides?"

"Gorbachev and Lincoln contend that the entire union must decide. The Lithuanians, of course, resent the parallel because they consider themselves illegally occupied," Foner said.

For these young people immersed in questions of nationality, borders and empire, there is nothing academic about the secession crisis now underway in the Soviet Union. "It's the future of our country," said Yulia Stepanenko. "And if it comes to tanks in Lithuania, I will be in absolute despair."

Soviet history—especially the history of annexations, invasions and threats—is the source of all anxiety in Lithuania and other republics that have made independence from the union their goal.

Gorbachev and his aides have all promised an approach of peaceful, political negotiation. They dismiss Lithuanian charges of a military build-up as rumor. But whenever an armored personnel carrier or army helicopter is seen in Vilnius, whenever a hard-line declaration is issued from Moscow, the memories brought to mind are unmistakable: Budapest 1956, Prague 1968.

It is almost as if Gorbachev's unspoken weapon in his attempt to stop, or at least slow down, the disintegration of his 15-republic union, is history itself. In both Vilnius and Moscow, people speak of all that could be lost by violence, that Gorbachev's image at home and abroad as a leader of reason, one who has discarded the tradi-

tion of Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, could be lost in a stroke. But all he needs to do to increase the political pressure, perhaps, is hint.

The Soviet government, which has apologized for the crushing of the "Prague Spring" in 1968 and has allowed all of Eastern Europe to go its own way under the rubric of "new thinking," has not by any means extended the same latitude to Lithuania. The Lithuanian declaration of independence has been declared illegal and every day it seems the tension between Vilnius and Moscow grows.

For Gorbachev, the stakes are tremendous. The challenge to current Soviet borders goes well beyond the Baltic republics. It includes the Ukraine, a Slavic republic of 50 million people where, with each month, the calls for independence grow more distinct, especially in western cities such as Lvov. It includes independence movements in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Transcaucasus, and Moldavia on the Romanian border. Even in Central Asia, the most conservative part of the country, there are rallies and groups favoring autonomy.

Igor Kesenzye, a student from Byelorussia, said: "Soviet Russia is a great empire and we are now watching its disintegration. Assuming that by my early thir-

ties I have not been killed in a civil war, I think what will be left will be Russia—the original, core territory. And that is just as it happened to the Roman Empire, isn't it? It shrank. I just hope it all happens without haste, and peacefully."

It is as clear to the seminar students as it is to Gorbachev that Lithuania, for all its nervous drama, is a preface to a prolonged epic, the opening episode that could determine the course of a much wider challenge to the shape of the Soviet Union. It is as if these young historians are watching a speeded-up Soviet version of Edward Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" being played out every day on the evening news: the East European revolutions of 1989, and now Lithuania.

Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis has already alluded to the specter of Soviet history, saying that Gorbachev's declarations and pressure tactics show that the "shadow of Stalin still lurks in the Kremlin." In Lithuania, many fear that while Moscow will not invade, it will carry out a policy raising the tension and looking for excuses for a further crackdown. Landsbergis has protested the presence of Soviet troops in the republic as "psychological warfare."

"I'm frightened," said one student, Alexander Petrov. "Power is still in the

hands of the Communist Party and the KGB. They can stir it all up if they want. And if there is violence, they'll say they had to do it to preserve peace."

Foner's students, who come from various republics, agreed that they would refuse to serve in an army that attacked Lithuania or another republic. While some hoped that the Lithuanian leadership would ease its insistence on immediate independence, they all said secession would be best for all sides.

"The idea of a multinational state is artificial," said Yulia Stepanenko. "Never mind the different languages and cultures. Just look at how these republics were annexed. There is nothing genuine about it."

"I'm from the Volga region of Russia. The first Lithuanian I ever met in my life was here, in Moscow," said Alexander Surayev. "And my feeling is, if they want to go, they should go. The problems of Lithuania are no concern of mine. That is what they say on the Volga, I can tell you. We aren't tied to them by language or any of the other things that join a nationality. Why hold them back?"

"I think a smaller Soviet Union—even if it is just the huge Russian territory—would be a more stable society," Kesenzye said. "Enough blood. This country has had enough blood."

## How comparable are Gorbachev and Lincoln?

January 06, 1991 | By Scott Shane

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MOSCOW —My paramount object in this struggle is to save the union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery.

-- Abraham Lincoln, letter to Horace Greeley, 1862

For all of us Soviet people, there is no cause more sacred than the preservation and renewal of the union, in which all the peoples can live voluntarily and well.

-- Mikhail S. Gorbachev, New Year's appeal to the Soviet people, Dec. 31, 1990

If a member of the U.S. Congress of 1860 had somehow stumbled across a century and into last month's Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, he might have experienced a powerful sense of déjà vu.

Member states of a union assert their sovereign rights against the center, claiming the supremacy of their laws over union laws. The center gives no ground and, one after another, the states declare that they are seceding.

Pieces of the parallel seem almost uncanny. After Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 but before his inauguration, South Carolina rushed to secede, fearing that he would move decisively to abolish slavery. Last March 11, on the eve of Mikhail S. Gorbachev's assumption of the newly created Soviet presidency, Lithuania rushed to declare its independence, fearing that Mr. Gorbachev would use his expanded powers to block secession.

Both presidents first responded with a blockade, both took on steadily greater executive powers and both were accused of dictatorial ambitions.

The flash point for armed conflict in 1861 was the insistence of the federal government on maintaining and supplying federal troops at Fort Sumter. The most explosive issue in the Baltic republics today is Moscow's insistence on maintaining union troops there and local officials' threats to cut off supplies to them.

Lincoln answered secession with force. At the price of 600,000 killed and a million wounded, the Union was preserved. Mr. Gorbachev has not yet shown how far he will go to save the Soviet Union -- and quite possibly, the choice is not his to make.

This historical analogy is tantalizing and illuminating, but it is ultimately false, a number of Soviet historians and political scientists say.

Yet Mr. Gorbachev seems to be casting himself as a Soviet Lincoln, shouldering the fearful burden of saving the union and arrogating to a future federal government the U.S.-style role of protecting civil rights against republican violations.

"I like the idea of a comparison," said Viktor I. Borisyuk, a historian at Moscow's U.S.A.-Canada Institute. "But



historical parallels are very dangerous."

In recent interviews, Mr. Borisyuk and several other experts explored the overlapping issues raised by the two tumultuous periods. They pointed to four critical differences:

- \* The Soviet republics are centuries-old national territories. The United States were mainly open lands settled by people of various ethnic backgrounds who had largely, with the exception of the African slaves, voluntarily left their national territories.
- \* The Soviet Union is, or was, a totalitarian monolith hammered together and held together by force, whether czarist conquest or Stalinist terror. The United States joined voluntarily into a truly federal system long before the Civil War.
- \* Assertions of sovereignty or secession by Soviet republics are motivated in most cases by a desire for freedom from the old, totalitarian system. Assertion of states' rights and secession by the Southern states were motivated by the desire to preserve slavery.
- \* Lincoln spoke not only for the federal government in Washington, but for 23 of the 34 states. Especially since Boris N. Yeltsin has arisen as a popular spokesman for the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, Mr. Gorbachev has been reduced to speaking literally for "the center" or "the Kremlin" -- that is, for the union-level ministries with their octopus grip on the Soviet economy, for the Soviet army and the KGB, and for the Communist Party, itself riven by secession but still more whole than the union itself.

"The South seceded in order to save the old system, based on slavery," said political scientist Boris V. Mikhailov of U.S.A.-Canada Institute. "The North stood for the new system. So history justified Lincoln's decision to use force to save the union. Here the situation's exactly the opposite."

American federalism, Mr. Borisyuk pointed out, developed gradually as a result of perceived common interests: from the colonies' independent status; to the Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, with their minimal center; to the Constitution, taking effect in 1789; and to such key Supreme Court decisions strengthening federal rights as *McCulloch vs. Maryland* in 1819.

"When the Civil War began, the federal system already existed," he said. "The so-called federalism we've had here has been totally artificial."

Alexei I. Kazannik, a law professor and deputy to the Soviet parliament, found a critical difference in the economic reality underlying American and Soviet federalism.

"The people who came to America mostly became farmers -- the ultimate example of the free labor of a free man," he said. Historically, by contrast, the Soviet Union stood for an economic system in which everyone was ultimately slave to the state, he said.

Peaceable secession, sir, your eyes and mine are never destined to see that miracle. The dismemberment of this vast country without convulsion, the breaking up of the great deep without ruffling the surface -- who is so foolish -- I beg everybody's pardon -- to expect to see any such thing?

-- Daniel Webster, Senate speech, 1850

So has Mr. Gorbachev, erstwhile epoch-making reformer, really been transformed into a defender of the old order, mere spokesman for the hold-the-line military-industrial complex and the secret police?

Are rising nationalist leaders in the republics really democrats at heart? Are they opponents of totalitarianism, or are they reproducing it on a miniature scale? If the center loosens its grip, will a peaceable community of nations arise in the place of the U.S.S.R.?

The answers are still emerging, but they are not reassuring. A Moscow correspondent reads with a cringe of recognition George Will's remark in a recent column: "Lincoln, by winning, as only he could have done, the Civil War, prevented the proliferation of petty, unlovely little nations in what is now the United States."

If, say, the nationalism of President Levon Ter-Petrosyan of Armenia seems to be mainly constructive and democratic, that of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia of Georgia appears often demagogic, divisive, potentially fascist.

If loosening the totalitarian bonds has produced in some areas new intellectual energy and economic entrepreneurialism, in others it has given rise to petty bureaucracy and economic protectionism. If in a few places market relations seem likely to overcome ethnic antipathy, in many others people seem to have resented Soviet rule only because it kept them from killing their ethnic enemies.

Lithuania, first to declare independence, seems an easy case for secession. But even there, Poles and Byelorussians say their border regions will secede from Lithuania and back into the union. The potential for long-running, possibly violent border disputes is hard to dismiss.

Ossetians and Abkhazians fear they would face blatant discrimination and perhaps even genocide in an independent Georgia. The Gagauz say they stand to lose their language, if not their lives, in an independent Moldova.

Indeed, if the death toll of ethnic violence so far is relatively modest, that may be only because the Soviet army and Ministry of Internal Affairs have cut off the conflicts rather quickly. And the number of Soviet refugees uprooted from their homes by relatively modest tremors has probably reached 700,000 to date, many of them still homeless.

The potential upheaval is many times that. Mr. Gorbachev has long quoted the statistic that 60 million Soviet citizens live outside "their" ethnic republics. The actual number, based on the 1989 census, is 71 million.

"Displacing all this huge human mass, disrupting these ties, means calling forth cataclysms that would have a catastrophic effect on the life not only of the country, but of the whole world," he said last month. He cited just one of the already tangible consequences: the exodus of Slavs from Central Asia that is creating a critical shortage of skilled workers and managers.

These are the harbingers of apocalypse, Mr. Gorbachev says. He evokes the specter of Lebanon, only with 100 times the population, 2,000 times the land area, and nuclear weapons. It is against such a horror show, and not only in defense of the old system, that he speaks.

The answer, if there is one, seems to be: make a new union, but don't preserve the old one. "The real analogy

with the United States," said Boris Mikhailov, the political scientist, "is not 1860. It's 1776."

But as general secretary of the Communist Party and commander in chief of the Soviet armed forces, Mr. Gorbachev is unqualified to create a truly new union. Even if he really wants to create one, the power of the old system will prevent it.

Who can make a new union? Only the republics themselves. And it is no accident that amid all the talk of Lebanon, the republics, led by Mr. Yeltsin's Russian Federation, have quietly signed several dozen bilateral treaties, bypassing the center and creating the beginnings of a new, truly voluntary, union.

This was a central point of the riveting speech at the congress by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had few kind words for Mr. Gorbachev.

"Now what is happening is the objective process of disintegration, and at the same time a new union is emerging, perhaps the brightest event in our far-from-joyful daily life," Mr. Nazarbayev said.

"I am referring to the signing of the treaties between the republics in which each other's sovereignty is recognized, the borders which have taken shape are ratified, the most effective direct economic links are established and the interests of the sides are coordinated. "It is rumored that with their bilateral and multilateral treaties the republics are setting themselves against the center. But we don't argue with this: We really are setting ourselves against it, precisely against the totalitarian center. . . .

"It is not the center which determines how the republics are to live, but the republics which determine how the center is to be and what powers it should have."

- Scott Shane is chief of The Sun's Moscow Bureau.





## Union Divides Lincoln and Gorbachev

**T**HE SOVIET UNION is breaking apart, and here in the United States there is mostly satisfaction. Indeed, it seems hard these days to imagine why anyone there would want union — unless to prevent the collapse of the central economy from dragging everything else down with it, or to preserve centralized control over the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In our day, the fracturing of large political units into smaller ones is in general a popular process — moving forward, as it does, under the banner of self-determination.

It was not always so, and especially not here in the United States. Once, Americans were passionate for union. The union was our own, the year 1861. A great majority of the people of the North (and a minority of the people of the South) were unwilling to let a piece of the country detach itself from the whole. Hundreds of thousands were ready to die to prevent this. It sheds an interesting, oblique light on recent developments in the Soviet Union, I think, to recall why.

Abraham Lincoln spoke for the supporters of union when, in his first Inaugural Address, he said, "I hold that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual." But it was not union for its own sake — mere amalgamation — that Lincoln wanted. The union was a vessel for a purpose high-

er than itself. "I have often inquired of myself," he said in a speech at Philadelphia's Independence Hall on Feb. 22, 1861; "what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy together. It was not the separation of the colonies from the motherland; but something in that Declaration [of Independence] giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and all should have an equal chance."

It was because for Lincoln the very substance of union was the principle of liberty that he believed a majority of the people had a right to compel a minority to stay within the union. He was ready to wage war for liberty against what some today might call "self-determination."

The tremendous difference between the United States in 1861 and the Soviet Union in 1991 is that, although at its inception the Soviet government was unquestionably inspired by a higher purpose, in succeeding decades that devotion was utterly spent — drowned in the oceans of blood shed by Stalin, stifled in the "years of stagnation" that followed. If union means the willing consent of peoples to forge a common destiny, then the Soviet Union died long ago. And it died not only in

one republic or another but everywhere, including Russia. Certainly the central government no longer represented a majority anywhere, as the results of elections in recent years have repeatedly demonstrated. To express it in terms of the United States in 1861, it would be as if all of the states had sought to secede.

The historical role handed to Mikhail Gorbachev was by no means to restore an ailing union to health, but to release the republics and their peoples from a central rule they no longer believed in and did not want. His role was the very opposite of Lincoln's. Lincoln is rightly honored for saving a union. Gorbachev, whose historical credit also seems likely to be great, will be rightly honored for dissolving one. It is a role, it is true, that he seems only to have partly understood. On several important occasions — notably in early 1990, when he sanctioned the bloody crackdown on Lithuania — Gorbachev seems to have imagined, briefly, that he might still be a Lincoln. But with the help of the rising democratic forces in Russia, he was soon brought back to the proper path.

Neither Gorbachev nor anyone else can "preserve" the Soviet Union, for you cannot preserve what does not exist. If the peoples of the former Soviet Union want union now, they will have to build one anew.

